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## Cavalier Treatment: Questions of Taste

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



# CAVALIER TREATMENT



BY LEE SPETH



## QUESTIONS OF TASTE

So I've seen *The Life of Brian*, the Monty Python costume epic. I mention this not because it was the Best Movie of 1979, but because it probably received more agitated criticism and misfired condemnation than any other feature in the year.

Example: I have before me a denunciation of *Brian* by Mr. Amenta, one of seven directors of an ad hoc Citizens Against Blasphemy group that was trying to get the movie suppressed in New York. He claims it "mocks the Virgin Birth, depicts Mary as the not unhappy victim of rape by a Roman soldier, depicts the Blessed Virgin as lewd and foul-mouthed...." Now if Mr. Amenta had stopped sputtering long enough to watch the movie he might have noticed that Brian's mother is not the Virgin Mary, but a different individual and Mary's opposite for comic effect. The Virgin Mary is seen once, in silhouette, kneeling by the manger, and has no lines. Christ appears once delivering the Sermon on the Mount and is not caricatured. To assert that Brian is Christ, and therefore his mother is Christ's mother, is nowhere justified by the script.

Much of the confusion stems from more dispassionate reviewers who asserted that Brian's life "parallels" that of Jesus. In fact it is merely contemporary. Brian is a political activist who is mistaken for the Messiah once at his birth and, later, in about the last quarter of the movie. He himself repudiates the notion.

Since *Brian* is a skit upon the messiah theme, and the Messiah theme is a mythopoetic motif of undoubted power, I am emboldened to use *Mythlore* as a podium from which to offer peace terms:

1.) The movie is not blasphemous. Even when it treats lightly things sacred to Christians or burlesques Biblical scenes, such ridicule is directed outward. The Python troupe make no claims to Christianity, and one can only blaspheme one's own religion. If you don't believe it, as Chesterton said, "try blaspheming Odin." The movie arguably does contain desecration, which is something you do to someone else's religion.

2.) If *Brian* was made as a disuasive, it won't work. If blows were struck against the validity of Christian theology, historical interpretation or sacred associations, I for one didn't feel them. Only the thinnest possible faith can be shattered by *The Life of Brian*.

3.) The interfaith indignation committees didn't work. My impression is that the movie has turned a good box office. I am puzzled to understand why the committees thought it might be otherwise; they seem to have largely been used to publicize the movie. In *Cocktail Time*, P. G. Wodehouse noted that every American publisher

prays that one of his books will be banned in Boston, while British publishers hope to be denounced by a bishop from his pulpit. Why oh why do the righteous perennially believe they will have a contrary effect?

4.) On the other hand, those who would defend *Brian* forthrightly as a satire on religion which has a right to exist as such should concede that it is no such thing; there is an artistic limitation in Monty Python here. Satire is humor at the service of integrity. It exists to call people's attention to the contradictions in themselves or their surroundings and can be distinguished from parody, the comic exaggeration of mannerism or style. All the real satire in *The Life of Brian* is political; one must grasp a subject from the inside to satirize it and I don't believe that Monty Python knows very much about religion. What cult ever sprang up as the cult of Brian does? Monty Python can not expose religion; they can only serve up their own perceptions and those perceptions are inadequate to satire.

5.) Not being Jewish I don't know whether Jews ought to be offended at *Brian*. My own impression is that the people involved are no more Jews than the characters of *The Mikado* are Japanese. (The leader of the People's Front of Judea is named Reg.)

There are vulgar jokes, parodies of religious movies (which is not the same thing as parody of religion - the opening for instance is modelled on the opening of *Ben-Hur*), and what is clinically known as frontal nudity. If these things offend, *caveat emptor*. I was not terribly shocked because I went expecting a Monty Python flic. I don't quite grasp what all these indignant spokesmen expected. The Python troupe has been flourishing for a while now and their mode should be familiar. Whether the self-imposed requirement to be "outrageous" hurts them artistically is an open question. Some of their stuff seemed funny to me, a fair amount didn't. There comes a time when even parodists might examine their own mannerisms, though it may take some effort to recognize that "outrageousness" and "irreverence" are mannerisms, as stylized and predictable as De Mille's King James rhetoric.



Not predictable was a curious turn that Walter Hooper has done his ancient hero. Since the death of C. S. Lewis, Fr. Hooper has edited and given the world much Lewisiana and we are all, I hope, grateful for *God in the Dock, Of Other Worlds* and the *Selected Literary Essays*. Now comes a very fat book indeed, *They Stand Together*, the correspondence of Lewis with his friend Arthur Greeves.

In these letters, many written before his fame and all written confidentially, Lewis imparted a number of bosom secrets, including some details of a sexual fantasy life that hinged upon dark imaginings: chains and bondage and human pain. These obsessions passed away with other problems of his youth and Greeves, in deciding to preserve the letters, scored out and blackened these passages.

Greeves is dead, the letters have come to a repository and now Fr. Hooper, who has shown commendable diligence in transcribing them and in puzzling out their sequence and dates, has turned the same diligence to piercing the screen of ink. He has given us Lewis's letters entire, the deleted passages set off in brackets.

It's hard to believe this act was necessary. We now know, I suppose, more about Lewis the man but I cannot believe we would have been much injured if we had not known it. The sentiment has been voiced that Lewis can now appear as "less of a plaster saint," that knowledge of his sadistic imaginings makes him "more human."

Well. Lewis's own church minimizes canonization; at Rome or in the East, youthful sexual irregularities are no final bar (St. Olaf II, patron saint and king of Norway, was succeeded on the throne by his illegitimate son). The saint has demonstrated heroic virtue; he or she is not necessarily perfect. I am suspicious anyway of people who make sin and sickness the essence of humanity; it's a comforting cop-out - how often we use it when letting someone down: "I'm only human!" The next step is that regrettable line in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, "Einstein was one of them!" (i.e. the space men). He was one of us and let's be proud of it. And sinners are "us" no doubt - but so are saints, even those whom human gratitude has commemorated in plaster and wood and colored glass.

As for Lewis, a number of his flaws were already on record: the omnipresent tobacco, the streaks of intolerance (he once declared that Quakers aren't Christians, and see Carpenter's *Inklings* for his Ulster attitude toward papists), his own testimony that the temptations in *Screwtape* are chronicled from within. For my money it was the countless acts of charity, the loyalty to his friends and his commitment to truth that drew him from the "more or less contented sub-humanity" to which we all tend and made him human in the fullest sense of the word.

So we return to the bracketed passages. I am not here arguing suppression; I'm willing enough that the letters exist. A transcription of the blackened passages could easily have been prepared and perhaps made available at times to Lewis scholars. But a man has some rights to have his secrets preserved less than twenty years after his death, secrets that he himself would have been hurt and upset to have disclosed.

We have of course in western culture pursued two separate paths on sex and its publicity: an insistence in law and politics that sex is private and no outsider's business and an insistence in literature, biography and day-to-day socializing that sex is terribly important, to be displayed, analyzed and talked about endlessly. Whether we are going to resolve these contrary bends is beside the present point.

Arthur Greeves once had the letters in his power; he could have burned them. As a favor to those who are interested in his famous friend, he allowed them to pass into public view, with a reservation. He registered that reservation unmistakably in black ink. We may think that reservation prudish and Victorian, we may invoke an absolute right to disclosure for historians that we deny to policemen, the fact remains that the letters were his and the reservation was his. The disregarding of that reservation strikes me as dishonorable.

Walter Hooper has been offered space to reply.

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## MYTHCON: RANDOM THOUGHTS

I have been to all the Mythcons except two; Mythcon III (which apparently was pretty much swallowed up by Westercon), and the Mythcon of 1978.

The pace of the early cons was frenetic. There were so many parties, rehearsals, gatherings, games, panels and papers, and I HAD to see them ALL. The attendees of those early cons seemed to be largely comprised of Southern Californians I'd seen at meetings every month (until the recent splittings into branches). Many of these people--most, I daresay--like me, were late adolescents sprung from very non-mythopoeic homes where an interest in things mythopoeic was not understood, or even regarded with some suspicion. ("There's not going to be any picketing, is there?" my father demanded, just before I left for Mythcon II in 1971.) So arrival at a con was rather like being released from a long stretch in the slammer--but only for a four day reprieve. Crazy conversations at all hours, hysterical laughter, tears, fervent friendships made, fights; beds were used only to fling discarded costumes on. Very few people slept, and if they did it was more often than not along with twenty others on someone's floor--even if your room was one floor above--for three hours.

Those early cons were for me, and I suspect for a large number of the rest of the attendees, mostly a social occasion. This is not to say they weren't important--far from it! Coming from a conservative

background where my mythopoeic writings and books were considered a suspect cross between hippiness and the sort of dull bookwormism that would never attract possible husbands, the chance to associate with people like me was an emotional and spiritual high, that had me in a fever of apprehension the month before a con, and in a depression after it was over.

The atmosphere is quite a bit different at present Mythcons. For one thing, the median age of participants is late twenties instead of late teens, and along with it all the hysteria and tension that seemed to go along with being an adolescent in the late sixties and early seventies has--well, mellowed.

This last Mythcon, Ten, was held in a huge hotel outside San Jose, California. This hotel was completely indistinguishable from all others of its type--large, decorated in that numbing plastic-and-plaster style that I guess is supposed to be cheerful but is more like an overdose of mono-sodium glutamate. The room were in three-storey buildings circling a lawn and a rather pleasant one-storey building which was given over to us. Within the ring was grass and a swimming pool. The inevitable hotel coffee shop was located in the main building, and all day (and night) there could be seen a small but steady stream of costumed

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